Where No Woman Has Gone Before: Humour and Gender Crossing in Star Trek’s Voyager and Enterprise

This essay investigates gender crossing and the subversive use of irony and sarcasm in the two Star Trek television series Voyager (1995–2001) and Enterprise (2001–2005). The analysis centers around the two female characters Seven of Nine (Voyager), played by Jeri Ryan, and T’Pol (Enterprise), portrayed by Jolene Blalock. With their skin-tight uniforms and voluptuous bodies, both women seemingly represent a return to the Playboy era that created its own peculiar myth of women’s ideal physical shape. However, in each case the affective quality of this stereotypical body image, i.e., its power to arouse desire, is subverted by the employment of rational, detached discourse taken to the extreme as well as the subtle use of irony and sarcasm. The characters of Seven and T’Pol transcend gender definitions and inject a good dose of humour into the Star Trek universe through their ironic posture combining sarcasm and wit. Gender crossing, albeit in a subtle way, is apparent in both characters when one considers their suppressed and, when they surface, controlled emotions. The fictional characters of Seven and T’Pol can be seen as crossing gender boundaries; and contextualizing their sexuality in humorous scenarios within the framework of an otherwise predominantly serious and dramatic vision of the future at once highlights and subverts gender stereotypes in a very effective manner.

This essay is part of a larger research project on gender relations in science fiction television and movie series from 1980 to the present. The project examines to what extent the paradigm shift that has occurred during the last two decades in popular culture in general and science fiction movies and television productions in particular opens up new possibilities for conceptualizing gender relations. The paradigm shift I am referring to is the more recent and still changing representation of women in visual media. Female characters were only peripheral figures in the science fiction universe of the 60s and early 70s. However, from the first movie of the Alien tetralogy in 1979 to the Star Trek Enterprise series that commenced in September 2001, women have been depicted increasingly as being equal to or surpassing men in traditionally male-dominated roles. Women have become starship captains, mission leaders, warriors, explorers, and scientists, thus invading with a vengeance the typically male domain of hero and saviour of mankind in galaxies near and far. Thus, it is not surprising that gender roles should also become more fluid, less confined to the constraints of binary concepts, and that female/male relationships should take some unexpected turns.

I focus in this essay on gender crossing and the subversive use of sarcasm and irony in the two Star Trek television series Voyager (1995–2001) and
At the centre of my investigation are two female characters: the former Borg drone Seven of Nine (VGR), played by Jeri Ryan, and the Vulcan Sub-Commander T’Pol (ENT), portrayed by Jolene Blalock. With their skin-tight uniforms and voluptuous bodies, both women seemingly represent a return to the Playboy era that created its own peculiar myth of women’s ideal physical shape. However, I will argue that in each case the affective quality of this stereotypical body image, i.e., its power to arouse desire, is subverted by the employment of rational, detached discourse taken to the extreme as well as the subtle use of irony and sarcasm. The contrast between physical appearance that reflects popular beauty standards and communicative performance that does not conform to socially accepted norms or is typically associated with male behaviour constitutes in itself a crossing of gender boundaries, albeit with a humorous twist.

Much has been written about the cultural significance of the Trek phenomenon ever since the original series Star Trek hit North American television screens on September 8, 1966. Indeed, the Star Trek universe of syndicated series, feature films, chat groups, scholarly inquiries generated by film and cultural studies, merchandising, and fan fiction shares a key characteristic with television, its predominant medium, which James Monaco described in his seminal work How to Read a Film as follows: “Television is on-going, never-ending [. . .]. Moreover, television happens in our space, in our time, it becomes part of our reality. As a consequence, it mediates not only between the viewer and reality but also between reality and fiction” (386). Compare this to Bernardi’s description of the Trek phenomenon: “Star Trek has mushroomed into a conglomerate of texts and intertexts, becoming nothing less than a mega-text: a relatively coherent and seemingly unending enterprise of televisual, filmic, auditory, and written texts” (7) and “Trek is flow: potentially endless programming for seemingly endless consumption” (8). And there is, indeed, no end in sight: although ENT, the fifth Star Trek series, was discontinued after its fourth season with the final episode airing on 13 May 2005, reruns of all series are shown in syndication or on select stations. A comical documentary entitled Earthlings – Ugly Bags of Mostly Water was produced for the 2004 Cannes Film Market, Trekkers continue to organize conferences, and “Gaylaxians” lobby for the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered characters in Star Trek and other science fiction. As Michèle and Duncan Barrett pointed

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1 Star Trek: Voyager will be referred to throughout this essay as VGR, Star Trek: Enterprise as ENT.
2 Aside from VGR and ENT, the series are Star Trek: The Original Series (TOS), Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG), and Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9).
3 Cf., for example, the websites of David Sinclair and of the Gaylactic Spectrum Awards.